



Cultivating Spirituality

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SPIRITUALITY DENOTES the spirit-embodied.¹ Therefore, it is impossible to be spiritual without being physical. This is akin to the essence and existence problem which has plagued philosophers for ages. So, when the issue is whether spirituality is declining; one should first turn to the question: is the body declining? If the body is in trouble, then the spirit too will be in trouble. The importance of the *sarx* is evident if we turn to the Hindu scriptures: there

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is hatha yoga to discipline the body and then, through the discipline of the body, is possible the discipline of the mind. Swami Vivekananda stressed on first having a strong body and enough physical vigour before beginning on inward journeys of transcendence. Jesus tells us that this body is the temple of God.² The *sarx* is not fallen;³ what we do to the *sarx*, or enact through it, may be death to the soul within. Spirituality concerns itself with keeping the soul within alive. It takes time and conscious choices to be spiritual for instance, in love. Thus, the first prerequisite for becoming spiritual is good health. It is only

a reasonably healthy person who can sustain the spiritual journey. And within the scope of this essay, we will map the trajectory that the spiritual quest can take through the use of the World Wide Web. The embodied being can undertake spiritual practices only if she or he is firmly or healthily embodied. This is why good health is a prerequisite for being spiritual and even when the stated purpose of this essay is to seek self-knowledge through the use of the Internet.

The last century was the goriest century yet;⁴ and therefore the need for spirituality was the greatest. After all, our conceptions of spirituality are results of our seeing of the state of the being searching for fulfilment. To become spiritual, an absurdity in itself,⁵ women and men tried psychedelic drugs and transcendental-meditation techniques. These were poor substitutes for solid spirituality. Then, there were some who experimented with sex as a form of revolt. Many foreigners came to India to find spiritual fulfilment. Most returned disillusioned and went back to their lives to be spent in 'little boxes made of ticky tacky' and they went:

to the university,
Where they were put in boxes
And they came out all the same,
And there's doctors and lawyers,
And business executives,
And they're all made out of ticky tacky
And they all look just the same.⁶

This song is from the period when Americans began their dabbling in Hinduism and transcendental meditation. The job of spirituality is to usurp practitioners from their comfort zones made of 'ticky tacky' and 'put in boxes' where 'they came out all the same' (ibid.). Drugs and sex are not recommended; the sexual experiments have failed; the side effects include addictions, various venereal diseases, and AIDS. In fact, the dazzling splendour of being in touch with the

godhead lies in ascesis and not in hedonism. This essay will concern itself with means to becoming spiritual in a world seeking transcendence.

It is one thing that it is quite difficult for most of us to be self-controlled and quite another matter that we must be self-controlled if we are to experience first-hand beatific bliss in *the here and the now*.⁷ This essay will now focus on the use of the Internet to underscore the positive effects it can have on spiritual journeys. The issue of the use or the abuse of the Internet crops up since it is both integral to our lives and at the same time, it is the most vilified amongst contemporary media. There is a need to see the Internet as an aid to spiritual practice, rather than a hindrance. Like everything else given at our disposal, it can boomerang on the seeker who cannot use it temperately. Before seeing how the internet can help us, let us quickly pass over the definite negative effects of the unchecked use of the Internet. This list is needed once for all, for the purpose of this essay, to clarify that the Internet can abuse a person and be itself abused. A detailed study of the scope and the nature of the abuses would be beyond the scope of this essay. The most evident abuses are: Endless and meaningless net-surfing; fleeting from one topic to another. This erodes the *jouissance* of deep-reading and contemplative study or *lectio divina*. Long hours spent on social media; seeking solace online for both one's real and imagined sorrows. Playing unending, interactive, and often multiple-player online games; bullying, trolling, and stalking online; addiction to the use of Internet and email; addictive downloading behaviour patterns through illegal means; and online window and real shopping leading to massive outflow of cash.

The point of listing these online ills is to precisely list how real-life evils have reincarnated in virtual avatars. For example, the supreme Godhead says of people who are distracted by their

addiction to sense-objects: the Internet can be potentially harmful if one engages in one or more of the above listed activities.⁸ And yet we should not forget that all these ills were there before the Internet became ubiquitous. It is wrong to think that with the coming of the Internet, human life has suddenly degenerated. On the contrary, it will be now shown how the Internet can help a person seeking the Divine in one's own surroundings.

The scriptures exhort holy company. There cannot be had from dead texts the joy of being in the company of realised souls. Further, each person has her own inclination and method of devotion. Some are naturally inclined to Advaita Vedanta; some to dualism and some to a particular deity. Before the advent of the Internet, such company was often not possible to seekers of wisdom. The Internet now has dedicated pages for groups of devotees to come together. Moreover, *lectio divina* continues to be integral for spiritual growth. The Internet provides ample readings free of cost to the devotees of all faiths. Through the use of web-based communication tools, there is now possible a greater range of such holy company. The need for a guru in the spiritual quest is well articulated in Hinduism; but now we can have spiritual directors,⁹ without infringing on the functions of the guru. While the guru can destroy ignorance through her or his mere willing; it is the spiritual director who through her or his daily communion with the spiritual aspirant can guide the former to the knowledge of liberation. The aspirant and the spiritual director can carry out their dialogue through the Internet. The Internet allows us to respond more effectively with our own inner urges. Depending on one's orientations, one can progress spiritually in ways impossible without the Internet.

The Bhagavadgita unfolded in a war zone. Earlier, the Ramayana was enacted through wars.

To be spiritual is to be engaged in war—wars against poverty, inequalities, and social injustices. One cannot be spiritual if one escapes from the overwhelming nature of life, being spiritual means to eschew solipsism and to engage with life in all its hideousness. Generally one cannot be spiritual if one is doing nothing in *the here and the now*. Religion and spirituality can have meanings only if they are foregrounded in actions leading to the alleviation of sufferings of our fellow human beings. Spirituality's doctrine of love should be propagated through social-networking websites to prevent young people from turning into fundamentalists. Spirituality is rooted in individual and social activism. The Internet has brought social activism to the room of the recluse. There is no place for becoming spiritual without being an activist. Spirituality is a function of our abilities to embrace the inhospitable Other. Only when there is renunciation, will it be possible for the spiritual person to empathise. Sri Ramakrishna felt the pain of creatures around him; and he was an epochal avatar. Thus spirituality is the ability to feel the pain of others and yet have the courage and intellect to respond to that pain, always trying to annihilate the cause of that pain. Hopelessness is not the way out; inaction against evil is not the way out; the only way to be spiritual is to act in *good faith*¹⁰ and in *the here and the now*. The emphasis should be to work out one's liberation in this present life. What avails one if one saves the whole world and loses one's own soul? But once a person has become relatively detached from sense objects, it is one's duty to help others concretely within temporality and not wait for some imagined better time in the future. As one becomes more adept online; one can not only get aids to become spiritual, but help others in meaningful ways to find their own truths through the Internet.

It is not the Internet which has made people lonely; on the contrary the Internet has facilitated human interaction; it is not that social-networking websites have dulled the intellect or the need for human company; but they have brought people together and will go a long way in bringing people together. The power of the Internet remains largely untapped throughout the globe. Internet penetration is low in India and most of the African nations. This is the century when Internet will usurp the television and all other forms of passive communication. This will help those who are perfected in the Sanatana Dharma to reach out to the millions who want spiritual help. Hindu spirituality can reach uncounted peoples throughout the world. Will the twenty-first century be a Hindu century? Young people throughout the world are tired of dogma; of categorical imperatives and religious extremism. Further; religious pundits within the Semitic traditions do not allow for the justified expressions of the desires of the young. Hinduism with its long history of tolerance; anti-dogmatism, and non-centralised traditions supports the fulfilment of the major objectives of life, dharma; artha, prosperity; kama, desires; and moksha, liberation.

Hinduism does not demand that its practitioners be either vegetarians; ascetic, or monastic. A person need not be baptised to be a Hindu. It suffices that one accepts the truths of the Hindu canon which would broadly constitute the Upanishads and the Gita. They are available free of cost online and thus accessible to anyone who wants to find liberation in *the here and the now*. Hinduism is the only religion which does not ask the practitioners of other religions to formally become Hindus. One can be a practising Hindu without ever leaving one's country and religion of birth. This is where the Internet becomes the connecting medium between the neophyte and the teacher. As

Buddhism has travelled the world over through the efforts of the Tibetan spiritual masters in the last century; Hinduism too can touch and transform the hearts of millions of seekers tired of religious high-handedness and existing top-down approaches. The Internet instead of being constricting, opens up new doors to the lonely soul in search of meaning.¹¹ The medium is no longer the message.¹² Hindu spirituality can be transmitted through the virtual world.

Now arises the question regarding how to go about the business of changing the world through disseminating Hindu spiritual wisdom?

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The need of the hour is translation. Hinduism is articulated in three types of languages: Sanskrit—and even Pali and Prakrit—the regional vernaculars, and existing English texts. Most people who access the Internet now and will access the Internet in the future will do so through English, with the notable exceptions of the Chinese. Therefore three types of translations should be done immediately: from Sanskrit, *et al*, into English; from Indian vernaculars to English, and there is a great need to update older translations into contemporary English. It is a shame that the Tantra texts for instance, have not been translated into lucid English. These new translations should be available to the world free of cost; much the same way that the main scriptures of some other major world religions are given out freely. The electronic documents should be available through open access portals on the Internet.

The translations project should not be confined to a select number of experts; rather crowd-sourcing is the way forward. Otherwise

the process of getting ready the Hindu scriptures will be too long and by the time they are made available online; young people would have become hardened older people who are already swallowed up by the lures of sense objects. The need of the hour is to act fast on a war footing.

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St Ignatius of Loyola raised up the Society of Jesus to respond to the Reformation in Europe; like Roman Catholicism then, Hinduism today needs people who can similarly respond to life-negating forces in all their manifestations in a systematic manner. And all these responses should be fast and easily accessible to those who may not be even seeking them. Hindu spirituality will have to seek those who are cut off from society. The Internet can allow Hindu rapid response teams to help both psychologically and spiritually those who are so incapacitated within that they are unable to find solace through the Internet. The Internet can take Sanatana Dharma to a wider audience. Hinduism having no churches, is not bothered with numbers of converts; rather the Hindus find satisfaction that others are allowed the freedom to work out their liberation in *the here and the now*.

Hindus established firmly in their Sanatana Dharma should be available round-the-clock to spiritual seekers online, just like experts of other religions, to help neophytes or the casual enquirer. Similarly, there should be portals operative round-the-clock, which will guide the neophyte to learn of Hinduism not through mere reading but through the mediation of humane guides.

Hindu chants and mantras for various worship, need to be translated into both English and


the various Indian vernaculars. These translations should be available as audio files online for free. Very few understand these Sanskrit chants and thus, they are wasted upon the listeners. Rituals are meaningless unless they are decoded. How many can understand the meaning of ancient rituals performed through the medium of Sanskrit? The Roman Catholics have done away with Latin in their liturgies so that the ordinary person can understand and fully participate in the Roman Catholic Mass. Latin scholars are there to interpret the Church Fathers; but the Roman Catholic missionary in remote India or Africa, uses both English and the local vernacular to transmit the Gospel message. Hinduism just cannot wait for the world to become Sanskrit specialists for the Hindu message to go across the Internet. This line of reasoning is not so absurd since this is an extrapolation of Swami Vivekananda's own desires: he began this journal to dialogue to the West. Had he waited for the West to learn Sanskrit, then he would not have begun this journal. Language, used properly, is not enslaving, but liberating. Without English, we would not have understood or known the Holy Bible. This author in the past issues of this journal has advocated a preferring of English over Sanskrit for the lay person; and in vernaculars for those who do not understand English. Hinduism can become web-friendly only when Hindu texts are available in contemporary English online and free of cost.

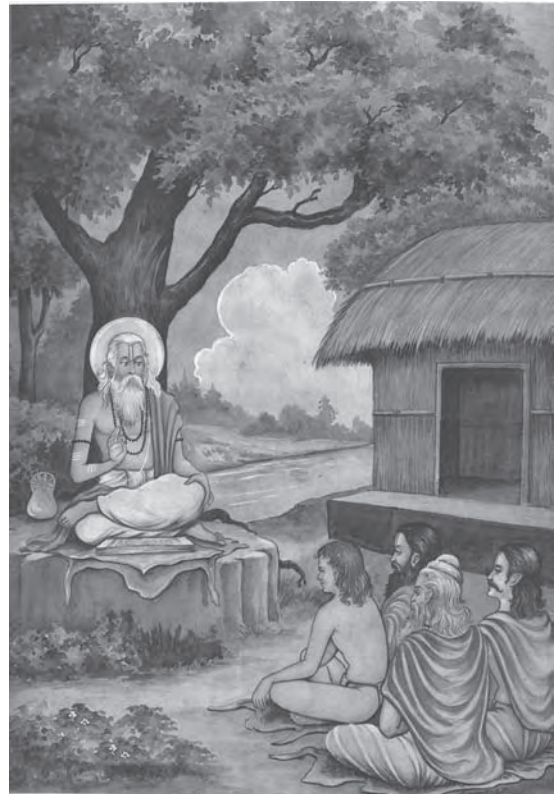
Indologists are insistent on their emphasis on Sanskrit. While this is good and necessary to keep up the tradition and the message in its original undistorted form, too much Sanskrit-fixation can be an obstacle to Hinduism reaching out to the masses. The result is that when a so-called 'scholar' attacks the Sanatana Dharma; the Hindus can only ban such books. It would be more proper to respond, in true academic or scholarly fashion, such vindictive 'scholarship'

sentence by sentence. Yet this task is onerous since the Hindu canon has not been translated as say, the Greek tragedies have been translated into English. Further, big publishing houses are not interested in publishing Hindu scriptures without cluttering the page with the original Sanskrit sources. Thus smooth reading is disturbed and the scholarly tomes have little circulation beyond elite and close-knit groups of Indologists. This needs to be corrected. Very few scholarly Bibles continuously refer to either Aramaic, Hebrew, or Old and New Greek. The *Jerusalem Bible*, for instance, provides a seamless reading experience in English. Moreover, excellently edited low-volume electronic documents of most Bibles are available on the Internet. Except the Gita with glosses by some particular traditions, serious commentaries on the Gita are not easily available online. Online bookstores have now through avenues for self-publishing, opened up the space for doing good Indological work entirely in English, as one pleases by bypassing publishers and their whims. To ready material for Hindu *lectio divina* is itself a work of prayer. And the world awaits these texts.

Hindu spiritual services should be freed of simony. There should be no mediation of money in this work. The work should be *opus Dei*. Born Hindus should be able to find both continued spiritual direction and Hindu-counselling whenever they need them. These services should be provided only by trained Hindu personnel. Cults which rob a person of autonomy have no place in Hinduism. They are akin to Western concepts of religions; they propagate a personality cult, whereas Hinduism has no known founder or even founders. It is an evolving religion and its spirituality is in adapting to the signs of the times. No event or literature can shake the Sanatana Dharma since Hinduism is not based on the character of particular historical people.

Spirituality is in no crisis. There is a crying need for spiritual solace and those who can adapt their own selves to the times will cater to the need of these seekers of wisdom who are tired of internet chat-rooms, endless simulations of the body and meaningless updates about current affairs. There is hidden in many, a little ascetic, who seeks silence and rest in the one's true personality, while the world turns.¹³

The world is more spiritual than ever. The human heart longs for the unction of peace and the Hindus have to take cognisance of this and reform their religion from within. This century is the century when books will die out; newspapers will be solely available online, and e-book devices with higher capabilities will overtake the printed word. Hinduism is the most adaptable religion in the world, and thus, it will adapt itself to the needs of the hour. There might be a Hindu century. 



Notes and References

1. See Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), quoted in Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (New York: Oxford University, 2009), 61. Creamer says of McFague that 'she argues that we must recognize that it is embodied creatures, not disembodied ones, who do theology'. Even within Hindu theology and philosophy it is us humans who can do Hindu theology. Dis-embodiedness is conjectured by theologians. Experiential evidence points to essentialism over existentialism.
2. See 1 Corinthians 6:19. 'Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?'
3. See F Leron Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids: W B Eerdmans, 2003), 178, 'Overall, then, [the Biblical] Scripture depicts the human person as a dynamic unity, which it considers from various perspectives using terms such as "soul", "body", "flesh", and "mind".'
4. See E J Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph), 1994. Hobsbawm repeatedly stresses on the violence that characterised the last century. He terms it 'the most murderous century of which we have record' (13).
5. We are already pneumatic beings. In a different context the Jesuit Anthony De' Mello equated our search for spirituality as the search for our own noses, not knowing that the nose is part of us. Similarly, through ignorance, our own superimposition and de-superimposition creates the illusion that we are not spiritual beings.
6. *The Suburb Reader*, eds Becky Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese (London: Routledge, 2013), 294.
7. Often Semitic commentators point out through a careful reading of the Bible, how only Judaism and later, Christianity definitively prove the working of God within humanly comprehensible time. The stress on the here and the now throughout this essay corrects that Judaeo-Christian position of being chosen by God. For instance, the advent of the epochal avatar, Sri Ramakrishna is nothing less than the advent of the Jesus or the Buddha. When Sri Ramakrishna was born; infinity intersected with temporality. Unlike the Semitic religions, the Hindus hold that eternity traverses temporality whenever the need so arises. See Gita, 4.7–8.
8. See Gita, 16.16: 'Bewildered by numerous thoughts, caught in the net of delusion, (and) engrossed in the enjoyment of desirable objects, they fall into a foul hell.'
9. Spiritual direction is more of a Christian concept integral to 'formative spirituality'. Christianity stresses regulated and disciplined formation before a person can become a missionary. Formation within the Roman Catholic traditions uses psychoanalytic techniques to help a person remain/become chaste, egoless, and faithful to the Church's magisterium. Spiritual directors have the role of being day-to-day sojourners of the neophyte Catholic on one's way to Christ. Hinduism is in need of spiritual directors, over and above gurus, since often the practicality of being one amongst thousands of disciples makes tense the guru-*shishya* dyad for the *shishya*. A spiritual director guides a few disciples over long periods of time. The guru's teachings are passed on and maintained in the heart of the seeker by the spiritual director. Hinduism needs to form individuals to become spiritual directors. These latter should be trained in both psychology, psychoanalysis, and in the Hindu scriptures. They must be individuals of deep inner convictions regarding the truths of Hinduism. Spiritual direction is not akin to mentoring and is a slow process and often, a lifelong process.
10. The term 'good faith' is used here existentially. To act in good faith invests existential validity to our otherwise existentially meaningless lives. Religious masters keep telling us to unite our actions to our thoughts. To be in good faith means to act out truthfully what we think.
11. The obvious reference here is to the book by the Nazi survivor Victor E Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon, 2000).
12. This is a rewording of Marshall McLuhan's idea that the medium is the message. See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 2001).
13. The Carthusian motto is: '*Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*, the Cross is steady while the world is turning.'